

Setting and Managing Expectations



Staff
Resource

This resource has been prepared by the USASA Student Voice team to **assist** staff and students involved in governance processes at UniSA. The USASA Student Voice team aims to provide current **best-practice** advice and support to all members of the University Community looking to **enhance** their outcomes by involving students in decision-making.

For the purpose of this document, "committee" refers to any governance or decision-making body with membership from both students and staff. This may include, but is not limited to: working groups, steering groups, councils, and boards.

Why Setting Expectations Matters

The setting of shared expectations amongst group members is a fundamental part of establishing effective working relationships. This is particularly important for University decision-making groups where there are inherent power imbalances between colleagues, such as staff and students.

Students new to these settings will naturally look to more experienced members of the group for guidance on social and professional norms. By taking the time to explicitly address expectations and norms from the outset, it reduces the likelihood of misunderstandings between members, and will ensure that the environment can foster mutually respectful and productive group dynamics.

It can also reduce the risk of inadvertently othering group members, such as students, due to a lack of understanding of established group norms. Because student members are far less likely to share space or hold conversations with staff colleagues outside the prescribed meetings, they will usually take longer to reach levels of comfort that enable them to participate at their full potential. By explicitly addressing gaps in experience through inductions, mentorship, and clear expectation-setting, the process will be mutually rewarding and lead to better outcomes.

Setting Expectations at the Recruitment Stage

Before inviting student members to a decision-making or advisory group, you should carefully consider what you will expect from them both in and out of sessions. In its barest form, this should include:

- Time commitment (in and out of session)
- Meeting schedule (if known prior)
- Location of meetings and whether remote attendance is possible
- Purpose of committee and member involvement
- Whether compensation or remuneration is provided

Ideally, these matters will be communicated with the student at the recruitment stage and you can find a more detailed checklist in the resource **Recruitment Checklist for Students in University Governance**. This will likely be the first touchpoint for student members and the way an opportunity is first communicated will shape their expectations immensely.

You should also consider the scope and limitations of individual roles and the overall purpose of the group. Often this will be expressed in the form of a Terms of Reference, but for more ad hoc processes it may need to be drafted in a less formal capacity. For example, if you are establishing an advisory group, the potential influence of this group should be made clear. If the group has no decision-making capabilities, say so. If you are inviting a student member to fulfill a governance requirement, considering referencing the rationale behind why student membership was included by policy makers in the first place.

The language used should also be considered. For example, the difference in scope and function between 'working groups', 'advisory groups', 'steering groups', 'boards', 'committees', 'councils' etc. can be mystifying even to experienced staff, so make sure this is clearly explained.



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Managing Expectations after Recruitment

A student member may not have sat on a decision-making group before and may be new to the whole experience. They may be unfamiliar with governance terms (e.g. 'quorum', 'chair') and may not have been exposed to formal meeting protocols. It is recommended that when introducing a new student member to these processes they are also provided with an explanation of the meeting procedures. This may include contact details of all committee members, clear processes for apologies or absences, the location of minutes and agenda, and the decision-making protocol. A glossary explaining key terms or acronyms and a handover with previous student members may also be beneficial. Using a central location such as OneDrive, SharePoint, or Teams to host such documents may also be helpful, but you will also need to consider whether student members have access to any such software.

Specific expectations, such as whether student members can initiate agenda items or will be asked to undertake additional research or seek data from their peers should be made explicit. Additional resourcing for such activities should also be considered, as it is generally not realistic to expect student members to take on out-of-session workloads disproportionate to other members, especially if they are there in an unpaid capacity. The process for initiating agenda items should be explained whether or not you expect a student member to do so as it provides context for the decision-making process.

Equally important is to define what is not part of the student's role. Without clear expectations, students may feel obliged to take on additional work or conduct additional research in an attempt to prove themselves. This pressure or lack of understanding can result in students focusing on the wrong things, dedicating time to out of scope initiatives, and even lapsing into avoidant or all or nothing behaviours. These situations are generally avoidable but can create unnecessary tension if not anticipated or acknowledged.

What Should Staff Expect from Students?

Staff should expect the level of commitment that was communicated to the student at the time they accepted the role. This is one of the main reasons that getting recruitment communications and inductions right is so important.

In a study conducted by researchers at Griffith University, Lizzio and Wilson (2009), found that the most frequent causes of breakdowns in student participation with university decision-making is "role ambiguity". Particularly, they noted that refers to 'a lack of clarity regarding expectations, but also to the type and extent of the authority they experienced in the role' (Lizzio and Wilson 2009, p 78).

It is also relevant that in most cases, student members of committees are the only people in the room not being financially compensated for being there. The ability to manage their time is something students will need to assess when they accept a role, but the reality is that many students will be juggling any volunteering around study, paid work, and other personal obligations. If a student has to decide between studying for an exam and attending a meeting where they do not feel like they add value, they will naturally prioritise their study or other obligations.

This is not to say that absenteeism is justifiable or acceptable, but it is an important reminder that students are navigating a highly complex set of priorities when managing their time, and that taking steps to eliminate role ambiguity is a way to mitigate this risk. In this sense, it is recommended that staff try to avoid perceiving instances of non-attendance as a lack of interest or evidence against having students involved in processes, but as a reminder to look inwards and ask "what can we be doing to ensure that student members have a sense of purpose and capacity to attend?"

This includes setting expectations early, meeting these expectations, fostering relationships where students are comfortable to discuss matters such as role ambiguity, and not to let past performance of individual student representatives negatively shape our perceptions of future dealings with students.

Lizzio, A., & Wilson, K. (2009). Student participation in university governance: The role conceptions and sense of efficacy of student representatives on departmental committees. *Studies in Higher Education*, 34(1), 69–84. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03075070802602000>